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ABSTRACT

Several methods illustrating how textbooks traditionally teach the use of pronouns in discourse in Thai are examined and criticized in this study. Examples of how "referential identity" and "lexical identity" are interrelated are provided. It is pointed out that (1) the semantic features of age, gender, and relationship are not sufficient to describe pronoun usage in Thai, and (2) dialogues and narratives based on rules of sentence-domain grammars do not accurately reflect the language of native speakers. The competence of the native speaker includes the skill to manipulate and vary pronouns through discourse. It is suggested that an objective of Thai language instruction should be to duplicate the behavior represented by that skill and to discover and teach the rules governing manipulations such as pronoun deletion and noun switching in sentence sequences. (RL)

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On the Role of Discourse in the Teaching of Thai

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One of the characteristics of Thai which becomes immediately apparent to students of the language is the abundance of possibilities in the use of personal pronouns. The choice is dependent upon various features: person, gender, number, status, age, relationship (formal, ordinary, intimate), and attitude (non-restraint, deference, assertiveness), are among those mentioned by Gething and Cooke in their respective analyses of Thai pronouns.

Combinations of these features specify the choices available to speakers. That is, to select pronouns the speakers draw from a set of structured possibilities determined by the sex, relative age, relationship, etc., of the persons referred to, such that person X would use a particular "I-you" pair when speaking with his servant and another pair when speaking with his boss.

While the features, or significata, which define pronoun choices have been extensively studied, this information has been incorporated in the most minimal way in Thai language textbooks. For example, the Haas Spoken Thai glossary contains ten pronouns: / phǒm,

dichǎn, chán, khun, nuu̯, thɔɔ, man, thâan, khǎw, raw/; AUA Thai Course has six: /dichǎn, phǒm, khun, khǎw, kɛɛ, raw/; some Peace Corps materials include those already listed plus / kan, kraphǒm, kuu, câw, tua/. Most of these forms are considered "polite". All are defined along the dimensions mentioned, so that in Spoken Thai /phǒm/ is defined as: "I; used by men speaking to equals."

It could be argued that relatively few pronouns are taught because foreigners will not be expected to confront the full range of situations available to Thais and therefore will not need the full repertory of pronouns. However it is not the number of pronouns introduced, nor even the absence of complete definitions, which are in question, but rather the treatment of these pronouns in discourse as represented in textbooks.

It is the case that one of the ways of binding sentences together such that they form a fragment of discourse, as opposed to a list of unrelated sentences, is the notion of referential identity. That is, sentences 1, 2, and 3 appear to be related in a way in which sentences 4, 5, and 6 are not. In 1, 2, and 3, Helen

and her are seen to have identical referents, as do Prime Minister of Canada, Trudeau, and jaunty French Canadian, whereas such relationships do not hold in sentences 4, 5, and 6.

1. Helen took a picture of the Prime Minister of Canada.
2. Trudeau smiled at her.
3. The jaunty French Canadian greeted the crowds.

4. Helen took a picture of the Queen of France.
5. Salvador Dali smiled at him.
6. The aging actress smoked her pipe.

In Thai language textbooks this referential identity, especially when marked by pronominal forms, is maintained by the device of lexical identity. That is, the same lexical item is repeated again and again. An example from Lesson 25 of the AUA Thai Course is:

7. khăw chôɔp thaan aahăan thay "He likes to eat Thai food."
8. khăw bɔ̀ɔk wâa aahăan thay arɔ̀y "He says Thai food is delicious."
9. khăw mây chôɔp thaan aahăan faràŋ "He does not like to eat Western food."
10. khăw bɔ̀ɔk wâa aahăan faràŋ cùut "He says Western food is tasteless."

In a sentence domain grammar, each of these sentences is well formed. However these sentences do not constitute acceptable Thai discourse, as the sequence would not occur in normal speech and would be perceived as awkward and ill formed by native Thai speakers.

One reason is that there is extensive pronoun deletion when the referent can be unambiguously identified , as in sentences 7-10. What would actually be found in Thai speech would be 7a-10a.

7a. khăw chôôp thaan aahăan thay "He likes to eat..."

8a. bòòk wâa... "___ says that..."

9a. mây chôôp... "___does not like ..."

10a. bòòk wâa... "___ says that..."

Another reason that lexical identity as a means of indicating referential identity is not sufficient when teaching Thai pronominal usage is the fact that native Thai speakers may switch freely between sets of pronouns in a single conversation without any change in relationship or attitude of the people involved.

For example, T.S. is a Thai woman majoring in linguistics at the University of Wisconsin. In conversations with her older sister she can use the "I-you" pairs /nóoy/(lit. "younger sibling") - /phîi/ ("older sibling") and /khăw/ - /tua/ at will. When one person

switches the other responds appropriately, so that if T.S. uses /nɔ́ɔy/ - /phîi/ her sister will use /phîi/ - /nɔ́ɔy/. If one of them switches to /khăw/ - /tua/ the other will also use /khăw/ - /tua/. The choice is apparently open to either speaker and is used, according to T.S., "to avoid monotony."

Another example of the use of multiple sets of pronouns in a given context comes from Narinat, a popular culture magazine with short stories, advice to the lovelorn, dress patterns, recipes, and an astrology column. These characteristics are mentioned only to show that the magazine has mass appeal and can be read and interpreted by most Thais.

One of the stories in an issue of the magazine has four characters: A- a man pretending to be royalty; B- his wife; C- a gardener; and D- a "spirit doctor" or specialist in the occult. In one conversation A refers to himself as /kuu/ and refers to C variously as /âay, man, eŋ/ and /muŋ/. In another instance B refers to herself as /chán/ and to C as /man, câw/ and /kɛɛ/. The spirit doctor refers to himself as /khâa/ and /kuu/ and to the gardener as /kɛɛ/ and /muŋ/. In all these examples there were other characters present who were

potential participants in the conversation and potential users of "I-you" forms. In very few cases were the dialogues specifically attributed, as in " the gardener said..." and "the doctor replied..." Yet native Thai speakers have no problem determining that, in a series of sentences spoken in a context involving many people, the pronouns /aây, man, eŋ, muŋ/ all have identical referents.

It is apparent that a) the semantic features of age, gender, relationship, etc., are not sufficient to describe pronoun usage in Thai, and b) dialogues and narratives based on rules of sentence-domain grammars do not accurately reflect the language of native Thai speakers. In fact, the competence of the native speaker includes the skill to manipulate and vary pronouns through discourse.

Therefore it is suggested that an objective of Thai language instruction should be to duplicate the behavior represented by that skill and to discover and teach the rules governing manipulations such as pronoun deletion and pronoun switching in sentence sequences.

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